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ABSTRACT

Mother Goose is well suited to use in the elementary ESL classroom for several reasons. The stories appeal to children's imagination, adhering to the principle that a good story should have surprise value, interesting characters, meaningful conflict, action, and realism. The natural rhythms help develop English intonation, and the stories reinforce rhyming skills and stimulate discussion. Mother Goose stories are an important part of our children's culture and also adult literature. They can be used for role playing, involving the whole child in learning. Other potential classroom uses include vocabulary development, eliciting children's reactions and emotions, and crafts. (MSE)

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MOTHER GOOSE IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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The need for meaningful language in meaningful context is well documented in ESL literature (see Krashen, 1980; Oller, 1983); at least at the secondary school/adult ESL level. Elementary ESL teachers have known for years that comprehensible input is the best way to teach language; indeed, it is the only way. Small children will simply not tolerate what is not meaningful to them. In choosing meaningful language for use in the ESL classroom, one can do no better than look to a popular old standby, Mother Goose.

Mother Goose is particularly suited for use in the elementary ESL classroom for a number of reasons. First, the Mother Goose rhymes tell a story. Something happens in them that is interesting to children . . . the rhymes adhere to most of the principles that Oller (1983) says a good story should: surprise value (e.g. Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater), interesting characters (e.g. Jack Spratt); meaningful conflicts (e.g. Little Miss Muffett); action (e.g. Humpty Dumpty); and they relate to the real world of the students they are aimed at (e.g. Mary had a Little Lamb). In a word, they appeal to the children's imaginations.

There are numerous other reasons for using Mother Goose in the elementary ESL classroom. The natural rhythms of the poems helps intonation in English. The rhymes help children regain vocabulary. Worth mentioning, too, is the fact that rhyming is a skill that first and second

FL 014 123

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grade teachers stress in their regular classes, and the ESL teacher can reinforce that skill. The Mother Goose stories provide springboards for discussion and a variety of skills, discussed below. Mother Goose rhymes are an important part of our culture, and as such should be taught. Virtually all children growing up in the English-speaking world have Mother Goose in their heritage. Mother Goose is the basis of jokes, puns, allusions in adult literature. Most of all, Mother Goose has been enjoyed by children since 1697. That is really standing the test of time.

Mother Goose is an excellent medium for a variety of teaching techniques which make the classroom into a stimulating learning environment. The poems provide ways to involve the whole child, and all of his learning skills. In acting out a skit, the words become meaningful and real because the whole body is involved, and the child can see the action. That poem becomes more than just a series of words; it becomes a part of the child because he has lived it.

When a child has a chance to comment on a poem, and his words are written by the teacher and shared (see 1b), two things happen. First, the child realizes the value of what he says. His words are important enough to be shared with his classmates. He becomes a "published author." Second, he can go back to his words and read them . . . or pretend to, if he can't read yet . . . the point is,

he knows that those marks on the paper represent what he said. That is written language and has meaning.

What follows are notes on some Mother Goose Rhymes and possible expansions on them that can be used in the ESL classroom.

I. There was an old woman who lived in a shoe.
She had so many children, she didn't know what to do.
She gave them some broth without any bread,
And whipped them all soundly and sent them to bed.

A. Vocabulary development: shoes

1. kinds of shoes . . . slipper, high heel, cowboy boots, loafers, sandals, hiking boots, etc.
2. where you can go in these shoes . . . beach, rodeo, dance, school
3. what you can do in these shoes . . . dance, hike, ride a horse
4. parts of a shoe: sole, heel, toe, tongue, laces, buckle
5. categorizing: magazine pictures of shoes can be used to put the shoes into categories . . . men/women/both, fancy/play/work
6. people names . . . there was an old man, lady, gentleman . . . who lived in a shoe

B. Speaking/writing/reading

1. Teacher can ask, "Would you like to live in a shoe?" As the children tell how they feel,

the teacher can write--"publish"--their comments on a huge paper cut-out of a shoe. Children can go back and read their name and read what they said, for example, Judy said, "No, because it is dark in there."

C. Speaking/crafts

Make two cut-outs of a shoe, and a bunch of cut-outs of children. Staple the two shoe pieces together. Leave the top open to stuff the "kids" inside. All the time the children are cutting and coloring, the teacher can help them learn the poem by repeating/singing it. The poem is memorized by the time the art project is complete.

II. Little Miss Muffett
Sat on a tuffett
Eating her curds and whey.
Along came a spider
And sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffett away.

A. Vocabulary development

1. variations on a theme to teach vocabulary and rhyming:

Little Miss Muffett sat on a tuffett.
Little Miss Mair sat on a _____(chair)
Little Miss Mable sat on a _____(table)
Little Miss More sat on the _____(floor)

Little Miss Mool sat on a _____(stool)

Little Miss Mug sat on the _____(rug)

Little Miss Mesk sat on the _____(desk)

B. Vocabulary expansion:

Spider . . . what are some other scary things? What are some not-so-scary things that you think she would like to sit beside?

C. Crafts:

Make a spider.

Cut a three-inch circle of black paper for the body. Cut six strips of black paper, one inch by eleven inches for legs. Glue the legs on, three on one side, three on the other. Bend them in the middle to make "knees." Turn up the "feet" a bit. Draw two beady little eyes. Put a string through the middle so he'll hang and bounce.

D. Drama:

Children act out the poem as they repeat it. There are three acting roles: Miss Muffett, the spider (a child holding his just-made spider), and the most popular role, the tuffett (a child on hands and knees). As all the children repeat the rhyme, the actors perform. Take turns performing until everyone gets a chance to act.

The Mother Goose rhymes offer a wealth of topics, and a wealth of springboards to learning vocabulary and other language skills. After almost two hundred years, they still hold children's interest and provide ways to learn about their world.

Krashen, Stephen D. 1980. The Input Hypothesis. In J. E. Alatis (Ed.), Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics, 1980. Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Press.

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